



ELSAH HISTORY

NUMBER 41

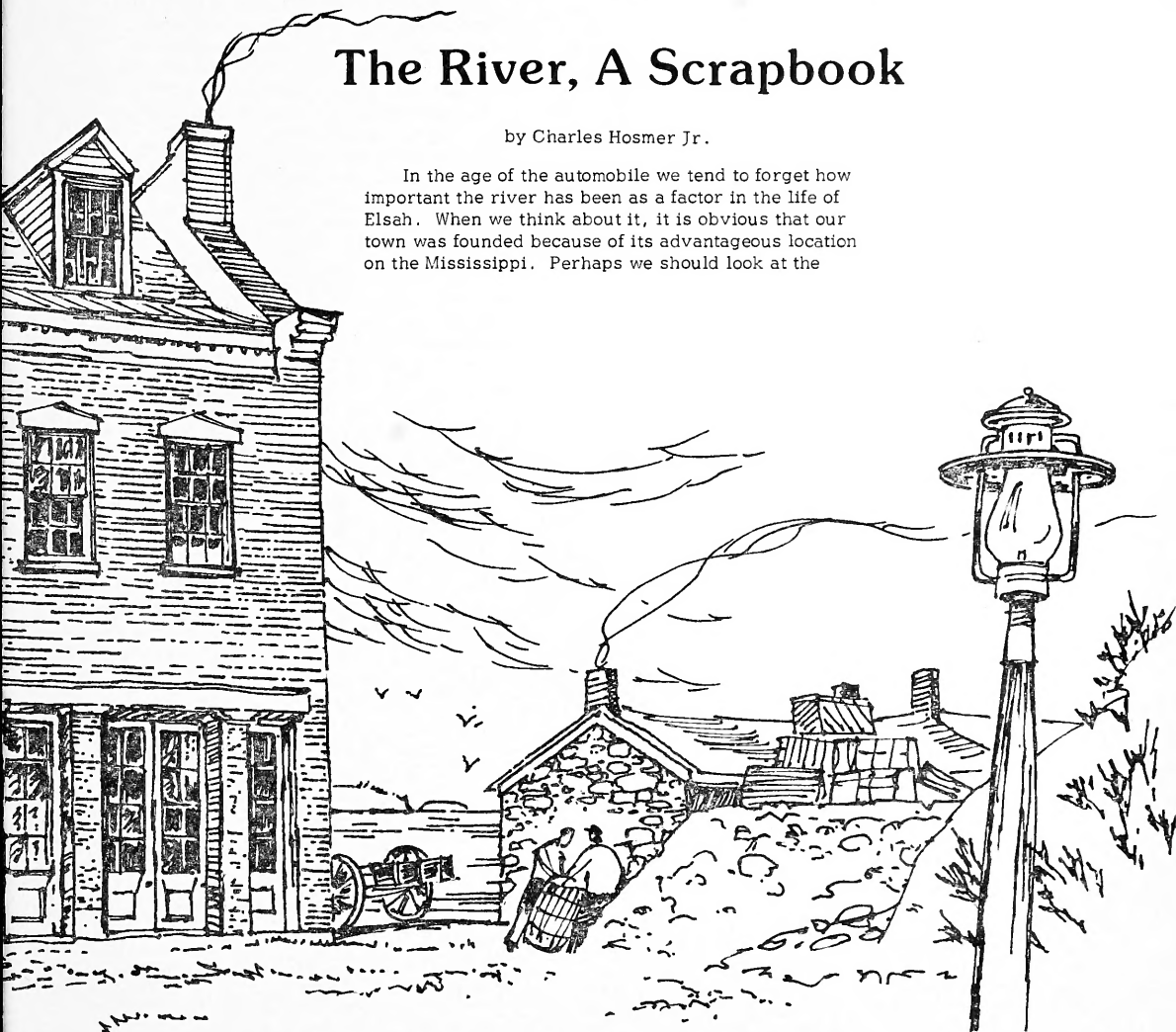
DOUBLE ISSUE

FALL 1982

The River, A Scrapbook

by Charles Hosmer Jr.

In the age of the automobile we tend to forget how important the river has been as a factor in the life of Elsay. When we think about it, it is obvious that our town was founded because of its advantageous location on the Mississippi. Perhaps we should look at the



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Elsah levee through the eyes of a reporter for the Prairie State (Jerseyville) quoted in the Alton Telegraph of February 18, 1854:

The landing for steamboats is equal to any on the river. For several miles along the shore the water is deep enough for large class vessels to receive and discharge their cargoes without difficulty. There is an inexhaustible quantity of timber, stone, and sand, for building purposes. The country back of and around Elsah, on both sides of the river, is among the richest and most highly cultivated of any part of either of the states. A good and easy natural outlet to the highlands in the rear, is obtained by following the gentle slope of a valley several miles in extent.

By the time this article was printed James Semple, the founder of Elsah, had been operating a ferry boat on the waterfront for more than a year. The site still bore the name of Jersey Landing when he first advertised his boat in 1852.

The river came to be the life-blood of the little town before the arrival of the railroad in 1882. Even after that date most of the townspeople looked upon the arrival of a steamboat as an event worthy of a walk down LaSalle or Mill streets. Possibly the narrow valley that confines Elsah invited excursions to the one open place available to pedestrians. Although the town was platted with two parks, Selma Square and Fountain Square, the levee was the most enjoyable place to go. The Elsah columnist for the Jersey County Democrat, writing under the name "Piasa," described the feeling of the Elsah citizens for the river:

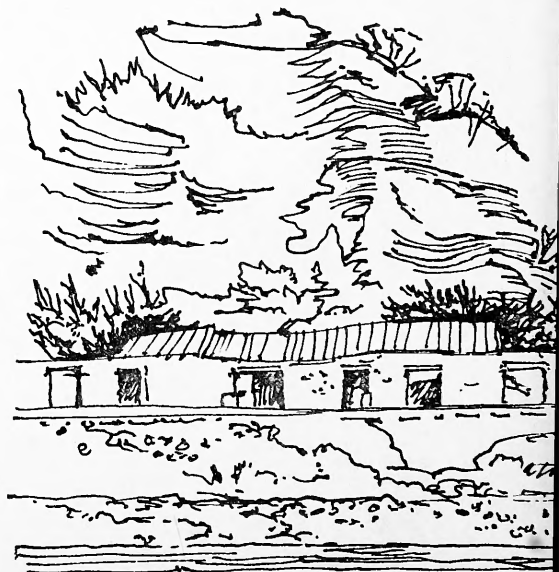
The river is open and the business of all river towns will begin to assume a different aspect. The steamer Dora came up Sunday, bringing merchandise to our businessmen and enlivening our young folks of the village who delight to promenade along the levee watching the onward flowing river and the various steam craft as they float grandly on its bosom. Nor is this enjoyment confined to youth only, the aged even are awakened by the whistle of the steamboat, and seemingly derive great pleasure after their day's work is done in getting a fresh breath of air from the "Father of the Waters."

Often the residents of small 19th-century towns found themselves isolated from the main currents of commerce and information. Railroads and steamboats by-passed them or treated them with contempt. Elsah was no exception to this trend. The newspapers are full of protests from the residents of the village commenting on the way in which the Wabash Railroad ignored their need for a station, an agent and a passenger car. Several reporters described the Elsah passengers as a group of lonely travelers huddled on the riverfront, waiting at 5:30 in the morning for a train

from Grafton to Springfield. They boarded the caboose and waited while the locomotive pushed the freight cars up the long hill toward the cemetery. It was especially difficult for the townspeople when they faced a steamboat monopoly. The Jersey County Democrat of February 24, 1887 described the moment when competition arrived:

The Spread Eagle has monopolized the trade between Elsah and St. Louis for a number of years, and until the Hudson appeared on the scene our citizens had to use skiffs and other conveyances to secure accommodations. What a change competition makes, instead of one or sometimes two trips a week, the new accommodating Spread Eagle comes daily. Is it any wonder our citizens en masse assembled at the Levee and amid firing of the cannon and lusty cheering, the Hudson shoved her gangplank ashore. Our people are for the Hudson, for the farmers do not forget how they have driven their stock to ship and had to take it back or sell at a sacrifice. We predict the Spread Eagle's day is past in the trade.

All through the last half of the 19th century the Elsah columns in the Alton and Jerseyville papers are full of accounts of fishing expeditions, bodies that floated up on the shore during floods, and accidental drownings. Many of these escapades were associated with visits to the local saloons, one of which was right on the riverfront in Cosmos Keller's Riverside Hotel, now the Felch home.



Some of the best stories that came out of a river village concerned escapades that pitted local youth against the currents of the Mississippi. "Don Carlos" reported from Elsah in the Jersey County Democrat of June 16, 1892:

Newt Wallace and Champ Brower came down from Grafton one day last week with a skiff load of fish. After selling out their stock they concluded to "do" the town before going home. When the steamer Spread Eagle touched here the boys decided that instead of pulling their skiff against a swift current from here to Grafton, it would be much easier to tie it behind the Spread, then get in the skiff and in this way secure a free ride home. The Spread landed here after dark. The boys slipped around and tied the skiff to her side. The steamer backed off and then shot ahead. There was a sound like the wail of two lost souls, and then there was a panoramic display of coats, vests, suspenders, pants buttons, pint bottles, fragments of skiff and flashes of paddle wheel. Then a skiff struck out from the shore, and after a short struggle with contending waves, two drenched bodies were landed that looked like they had floated here all the way from St. Paul. They proved to be Wallace and Brower, and when they came to they wanted to know if the Odd Fellows' Hall had fallen over them. (Old Fellows' Hall was a prominent riverfront building that faced Riverview House until it was torn down in 1951.)

One of the favorite topics of conversation in Elsah must have been the various moods of the river. It is important to remember that during many parts of the year the Mississippi was not safe for navigation. Three contrasting reports from the Jersey County Democrat will serve to show how the seasons either gave Elsah too much water, too little water or a large quantity of ice. First, March 2, 1899:

The ice has broken loose, and is thundering past Elsah with an awful crash. Trees, dogs, horses and frozen mules are hurrying past in one grand race for supremacy of speed.

June 2, 1892:

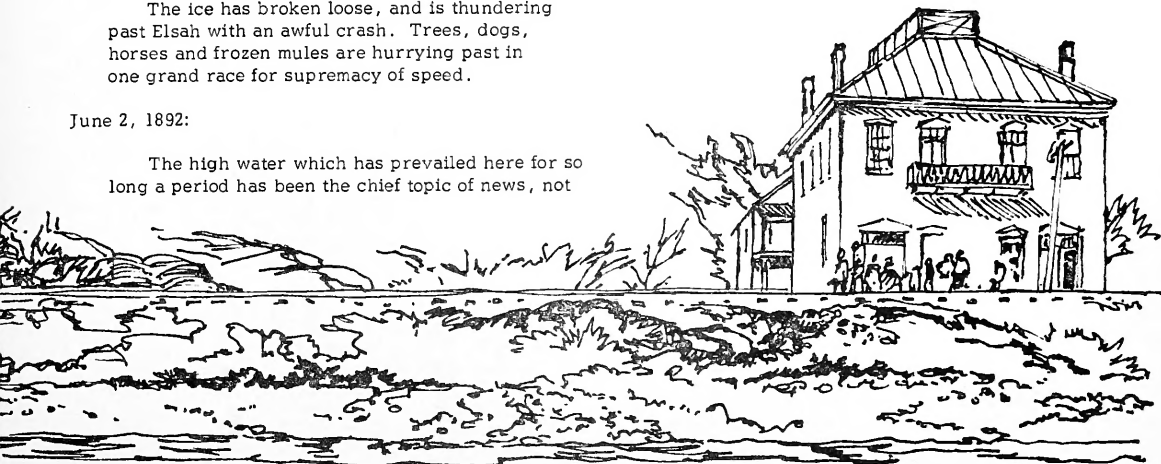
The high water which has prevailed here for so long a period has been the chief topic of news, not

only here but in general, all along the immense line of its devastation. The damage is awful and can hardly be estimated, especially in the case of property holders in the lower lands. From this town our citizens could see droves of cattle, horses and hogs, and great quantities of other property being removed in steamboats, skiffs, rafts, or any other means available. This, the reader will understand, occurred in the Missouri bottoms and islands opposite Elsah. The river here rose to such a stage as to surpass that of the year 1858, and was only exceeded by that of 1844. The long Bluff Line (railroad) trestle in front of our village was lifted from its foundation and required constant attention of bridge superintendent Fred Offenkamp, with a large force of extra men, to prevent it from floating away.

December 3, 1891:

Lost, somewhere on the south front of Elsah, a river, generally well behaved, answers to the name of Mississippi. Was in this condition when last seen and heading for New Orleans. Any information concerning its whereabouts will be thankfully received by Mayor D. B. Walker.

In the days before the flood control projects and superhighways, the people of Elsah found themselves with too much or too little water in their river. Photographs show sand bars in front of Elsah that were the size of small farms during the dry season. On the other hand, a spring flood might cut the little town off from neighboring communities along the river. The Mississippi has proven to be the life-blood of Elsah, but the great river has been impossible to confine or regulate. Villagers have learned to read the river the same way they read the climate; they expect constant change.



The December Flood

by Paul O. Williams

A flood on the upper Mississippi in December? No one expected it. Such a thing has not happened in the past. But then in 1982 we experienced over 17½ inches more rain than the average for the year before the time of the flood, and the end of November saw a week with 5 inches of rain.

The water rose across Mississippi Street in Elsah around December 3rd. It then continued to rise, slowly, until by the 10th, when it crested at Elsah, it was within a foot and a half of the River Road in some places. The flood began to drop on Saturday, the 11th. By Sunday evening, Mississippi Street, which had been almost 4 feet under at one point, was out of the water again. From then on the flood subsided more slowly.

A number of snakes and turtles came out of hibernation because of the flood, only to be killed on the River Road by traffic. Almost all of these lay on the river side of the road. In their sluggish condition, they apparently did not get far.

In Elsah, river level in the creek was back up under the bridge across Mill Street north of Maple-- at the Elsah Emporium. Earl's Cottage was surrounded. The basements of the Riverview House, Dean's, Raney's, Ouderkirk's, and Darr's were affected.

Grafton, as usual, was much more severely flooded than Elsah, but it was not a bad flood from their practiced perspective. On Tuesday evening, December 7th, though, a house out in the water caught fire, and the blaze had to be fought from small boats until a large army truck was brought in to put the hoses on.

Flooding in the Illinois River was serious, especially up toward Peoria, and on the Meramec, south of St. Louis, it was disastrous, especially in the community of Times Beach. Citizens of the whole area were quick to rally to the aid of the flood victims with the generosity that is one of the great assets of our community at large.

COMMENTARY

In the wake of the flood the usual questions reappeared. Flood victims called for the building of levees and dams to protect their homes and property. And yet this property lies in areas traditionally liable to flooding. Already, channelizing of rivers for barge traffic and leveeing in of natural flood plains have raised floods above their previous levels considerably when a given amount of water has to use the river systems. Thus on the one

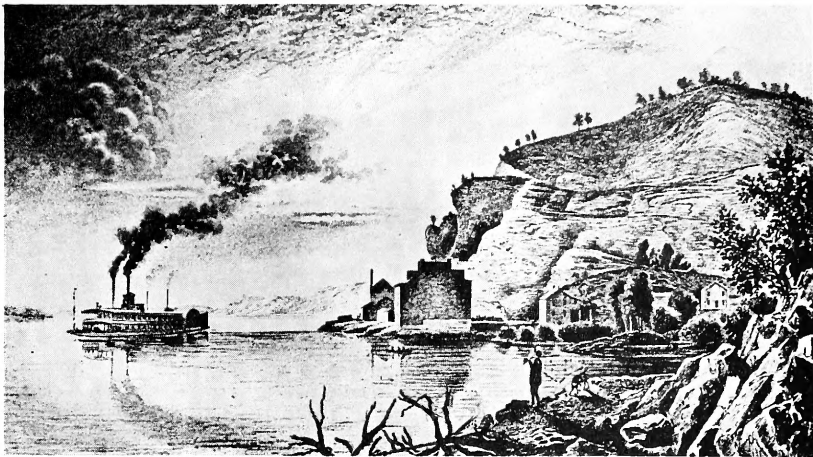
side, citizens build in flood prone areas and then call for vast expenditures to protect them, while on the other people call for abandonment of flood plains to agriculture and other activities not catastrophically damaged by flooding.

Often flood prone land is cheap, and it entices people willing to take a chance to try to save money. When the chance doesn't prove out, others come in to help the victims. The question is whether it is reasonable to expect the public to support such ventures. One recalls that not many years after the great flood of 1973, a developer wanted to build a subdivision in the Wood River area that had been eight feet underwater. In that case, fortunately, he was prevented. In some cases, the homes are built.

This sort of issue is necessarily of concern to old riverside communities like Elsah, because while they have accommodated themselves to the floods of the past, further interference with the river causes the floods to enter these communities at unprecedented levels, as occurred in 1973. Thus to advance the new enterprises of some people, established communities of others are brought into jeopardy.

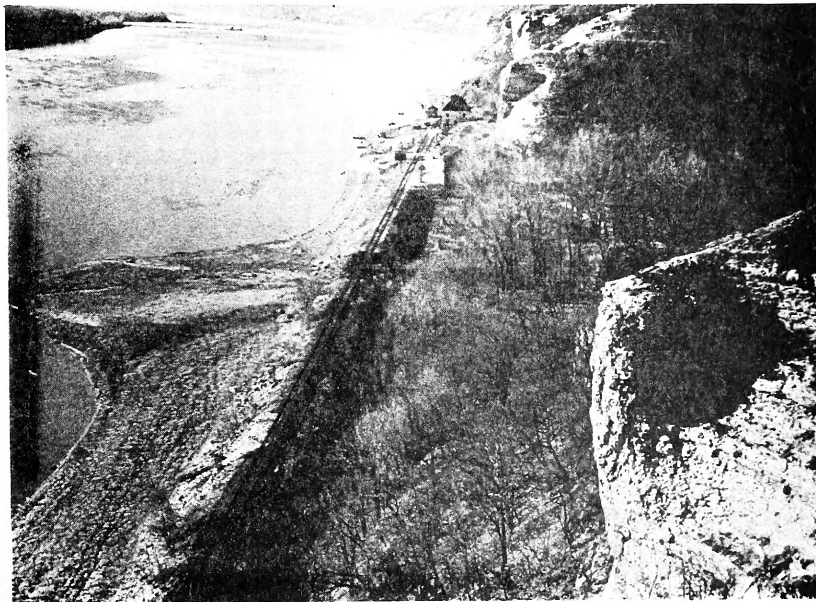
No doubt these issues will continue to be considered. If it needed to be shown once more, the flood of December, 1982, indicated that the rivers will not be curtailed or tamed. One can manage them only to a certain degree. It seems far easier to realize that one must cooperate with the natural drainage system of the Midwest and live so as to allow it its periodic excesses and rampages. They will occur, but sensible respect for them will permit us all to use the flood prone lands near the rivers without undue hardship. P.O.W.





(46) Above: The Elsayh waterfront from an artist's lithograph of the 1870's. Note the barren hills and how far the river encroaches upon the village proper. The large bluff/hill is called Mount Radiance.

(47) Below: The riverfront in 1931. Note the cornfield. (Source: Principia Archives)



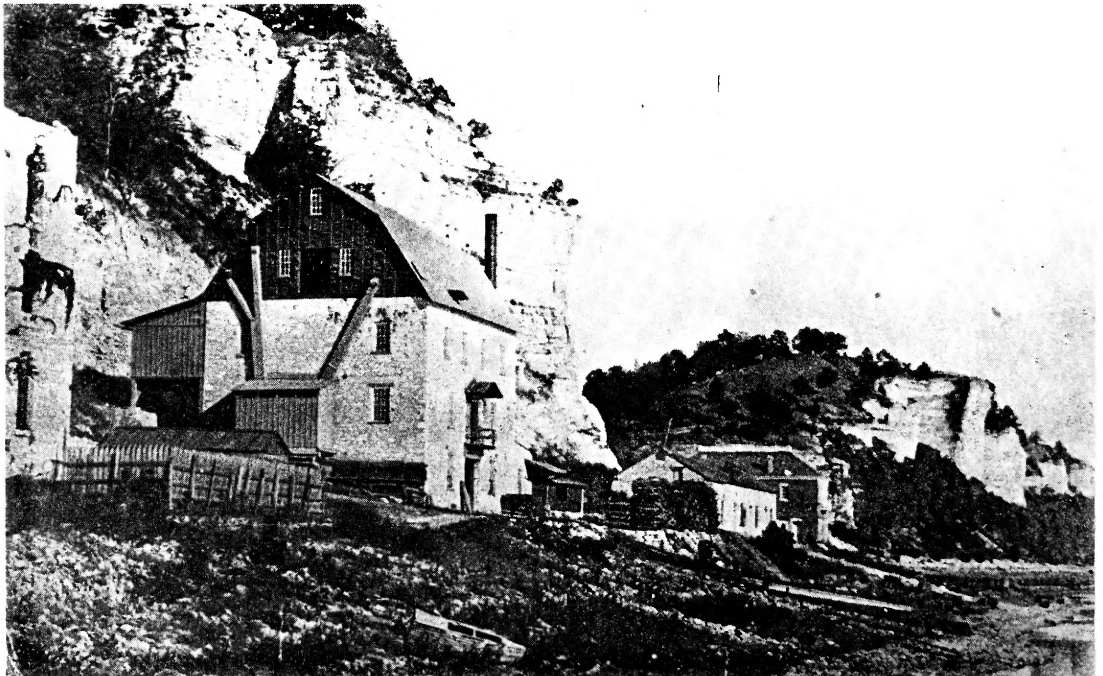
AN ELSAH ALBUM

FALL 1982



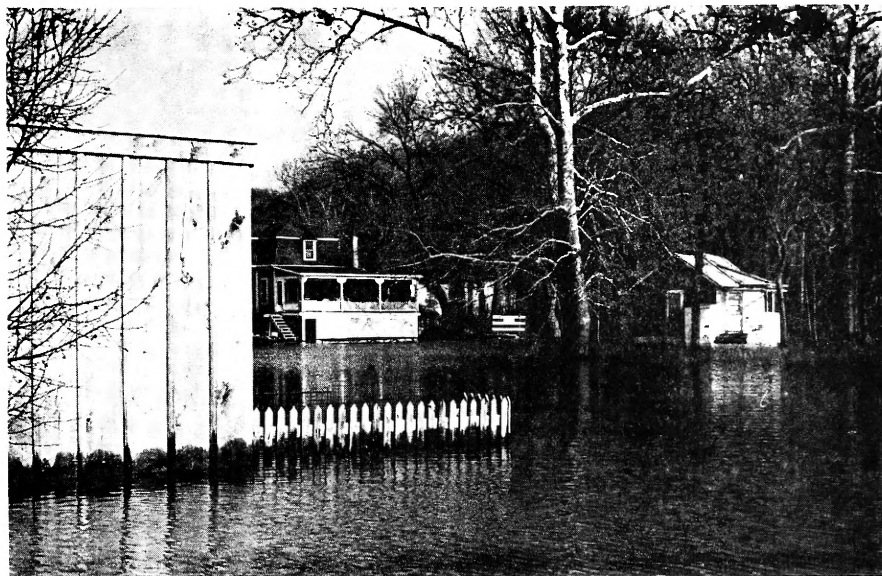
(48) Above: The "Mount Vernon Bluff" -- to the east of the entrance to Elsie, ca. 1882. Notchcliff, the summer residence of Lucy Semple Ames, is just barely identifiable in the top left. (Source: Principia Archives)

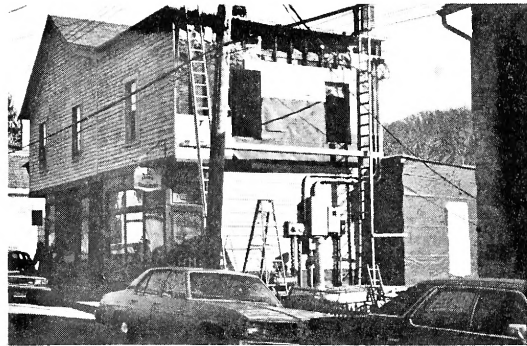
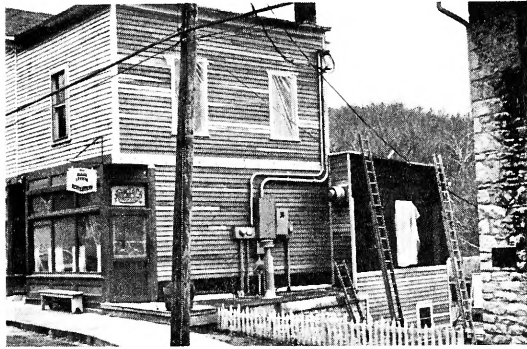
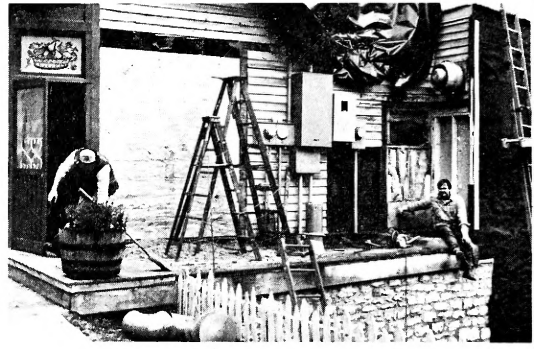
(49) Below: The Elsie waterfront sometime after 1886 -- looking east. The farthest building is the Odd Fellows Hall. The gambrel roofed structure was built as a flour mill by Enos T. Doron in 1877. On the extreme left is a small section of the Knapp and Goodrich distillery built in 1858 (burned in 1870). (Source: Byron Brock)





(50, 51) Two photos of the December, 1982 flood, taken by Paul Williams. Above: The water level in the spring 1979 flood reached the second clapboard on "Earl's Cottage." In the superflood of 1973, it reached the window sills! Below: The water has already begun to recede as seen on the Felch garage. In 1979, the fence was underwater and in 1973, the water almost reached the first floor level of the Darr House. (The covered porch is a recent addition.)





(52-57) From left to right: A mottly selection of photos showing the repair of the Mott Commercial Building. The emergency plastic tarpauline helped the soggy wall dry out after being soaked for several days. There was no boxing beneath the clapboards, so plywood was added to reinforce the walls. Completely new window casings and sash were installed. Note the wonderful absence of snow (through mid-January)! The final photo shows the new clapboards in place and the lattice porch which hides the electrical service wire. Pictured facing us in two of the photos is Glen McNelly, chief carpenter for the project. (Photos by G. F.)

Major Repairs

by Glenn Felch

In late November, 1982, after several days of rain and just prior to the surprise December flood, Historic Elsie Foundation was forced to accelerate its restoration plans for the Mott Commercial Building--present location of the Foundation's Visitor's Center and the Elsie Landing Restaurant.

So wet had become the south wall (riverside) and its adjoining entrance deck, that the sponge-like old wood could hold no more water, and a persistent network of leaks invaded the baking area of the Restaurant, threatening to short out the electric ovens and other appliances. The Restaurant had no choice but to close until temporary safety precautions could be taken.

As a quick, makeshift solution, a giant plastic tarpaulin was suspended over the main portion of the south wall and numerous small holes were once again stuffed with glazing compound. The tarp remained for almost three weeks while plans were made and bids were let for a more finished solution to the problem. Implementation was dependent upon the weather--a risk at this time of year under any circumstances--but all evolved very smoothly, and to everyone's pleasure the most crucial aspects of the work were accomplished without serious deterrence. We were even provided with one day in January which offered temperatures in the 60's, the very day a major roof-tarring job was scheduled!

Specifically, the leakage dilemma was the result of accumulated problems. First, when the east end of the building was added (shortly after 1900) to the original 1894 Mott structure (and utilizing the existing foundation of an adjacent ice house), a much inferior standard of carpentry was accepted. A lack of sheathing (boxing) ("boarding-boards"), meant that the clapboards were nailed directly to the studs. And these being a poor grade of clapboards (resawn vs. "heart-cut"), they warped and split with age thereby exposing the framing directly to moisture--especially on the south side which receives the heaviest "weathering." Secondly, a much inferior framing of both walls and windows caused a faster deterioration of sills, sash, and trim. (The framing was not supported with proper sills and bracings; gradual settling and twisting made all the strain visible on the clapboards.) Thirdly, the unusual configuration of the roofs (two of them being flat), exposed the false fronts to persistent water damage. Fourthly, the addition provided access to its street level rooms by way of a flat deck which served three separate entrances! It is nearly impossible to make flat wooden porch decks with sills and railings water-tight--especially without proper design and maintenance. And finally, the addi-

tion of electrical service conduit and exhaust vents through the deck itself (1960's-80's), compounded the already difficult situation. (In the case of the deck, the degree of decay which was found when the old flooring was removed, verified that the problem was not new. But because the area it covered was first used as an ice house and later not even that, the problem was easily tolerated if not completely unnoticed.)

These problems were no surprise to HEF. For nearly three years the Foundation had been actively pursuing a grant package to refurbish, in detail, the entire exterior of the structure. While exploring the possibilities for such, a new roof was applied and some minor repairs were made. As the grant situation became fainter (due partially to our location in Southern Illinois and partially to the sudden suspension of state and federal funding), we decided to do a gradual implementation of the restoration needs in lieu of the all-at-once approach. And in the late fall of 1982, a mason (Gerald Walker of Alton) was hired to tuck point all the exterior foundation to the building. Plans called for the repair of the south wall in the spring of '83--but the wet December weather of 1982 forced action immediately and therefore financing a major loan in order to re-do all the south wall and its adjoining surfaces.

Fortunately, two financial matters made this possible. First, the mortgage which HEF had been carrying while purchasing the building, had been paid off in 1981. Second, the newly re-negotiated lease with The Elsie Landing (effective in August 1982) created more realistic monthly income to the Foundation, enabling the current project, in large measure, to pay for itself.

Carpenter Glenn McNelly (of Grafton), and a crew of two, received the bid and the complex problems were tackled and solved. As anyone who has worked with old buildings knows, the real needs are not always known until one has ripped into the problem itself. And for this project, countless small decisions were necessarily made on-the-spot. The single most expensive aspect of the work was the decision to relocate the electrical service so as not to create a new eye-sore in the middle of the newly restored wall. (This was efficiently and ably accomplished by Bill Zeigler and family with the help of CIPS.) Several versions of porch and lattice were considered before deciding on the final one. Good suggestions from the Elsie Zoning Board helped resolve the peculiar geometry of the entry deck. The resolution of uneven floors, badly torqued door and window jambs,

"floating" studs, mis-matched trim, peculiar flashing techniques, etc.--all test even the most patient of carpenters. We are decidedly grateful for our fine crew who join the Elsah Hall of Fame for noble carpentry!

Dispensing with details, the essence of what these men did was to remove all the old siding and trim, sheathe the walls in plywood and water-proof paper, re-clap-board the surfaces (with redwood--pine not being available in this area), re-frame and install replica windows (sash made by Messing Planing Mill in St. Louis), re-do the entire entrance deck; and resolve countless weather-proofing needs.

Still remaining (inclusive of the entire structure), are items including wooden storms and doors, better attic ventilation, improved eave troughs and, of course, painting.

Meanwhile, a drive past the building is a wonderful experience because a new sense of dignity prevails: a greatly improved image, and a feeling of enduring stability which new wood reverently exudes.

We are periodically asked why HEF has devoted so much energy and funding to the Mott Commercial Building (named, by the way, after Lee Mott, Elsah's pioneer druggist who built the original portion of the structure). As a 19th c. commercial structure it is valuable to the core of "downtown" Elsah. It remains one of the very few obviously commercial structures (with its store-front windows) in contrast to other residential buildings which were used for commercial purposes. It symbolizes the spirit of a once very active and bustling village. It provides a necessary, dry home and headquarters for the Foundation's files and publications. And, once this major repair work is accomplished, it will serve as a significant source of income for various projects which the Foundation would like to provide for the community.

Sometimes a small surprise is discovered during a project like this one which reveals a curious, amusing, or in this case, very practical bent about those who lived in Elsah and who helped shape its present appearance. On the day that the carpenters removed the siding from the SE portion of the south wall, they revealed an unusual interior boxing made up of random short sections of what must have been packing crates for food--when the building served as a grocery. Stenciled or hand lettered on these wooden slats were the following words and abbreviations:

pork loins
ice cream
Spatz Bros. Elsah Ill.
P.O.O.R.
Net wt.
Exp.

However, what we were all looking for, with ever optimistic eyes, was what we never found--a bundle of long hidden and long forgotten currency, earmarked to pay for this very project!

And finally, we appreciate the patience of The Elsah Landing and their customers throughout the various but unavoidable messes generated by this work. We expect the long run to prove it all worth it!

Holiday Walk

Candle bright, candlelight
Candles for a Christmas night...
by Maryann Pitchford

Sparkling with holiday spirit, Elsah was an enchanted village the evening of December 16th, 1982. Historic Elsah sponsored a candlelight walking tour of thirteen homes bedecked with Christmas cheer.

A surprisingly balmy evening, with homes open dotted by exterior candlelight, welcomed guests beginning at 6:30. Entertainment and refreshments were served in the Village Hall from 7:30 to 8:30. The second group of homes were then opened from 8:30 until 9:30.

The door decorations of natural trimmings, welcomed you into the warmth of cozy fires, the fragrance of pine and many treasured ornaments. Holly garlands used in abundance, bell collections, doll houses and antique toys, made one realize the joys of Christmas through a child's eyes. In some of the homes piano or music boxes played, while hosts explained the history or design of the homes.

The evening was special and a vision of what Christmas is about--love, fellowship, giving and caring. On behalf of Historic Elsah, we would like to thank everyone for their support and efforts to make the evening a success: Sara Rockabrand and Marie and Paul Garritson, for the music in the Village Hall; Shirley Vogt, for the decorations; Blanche Darnell and Irene and Maitland Timmermiere, for the refreshments; and Jeralyn Hosmer, for coordinating the open houses.

The following homes were open during the Walk: Felch, Pfeifer, Bradley, Belote, McIntire (Gray), Bunting, Barnes, Pitchford, Ives, Bruns, Rockabrand, Hosmer, and Stickler.

NOTEWORTHY

If ever you wished that you could sit in a French kitchen, wood panelled, with earth-colored tiles on the floor and gleaming copper pots hanging over the marble covered counter, while delicious fragrances of bread-baking, waft around you, then you should have attended one of the two CROISSANT BAKING SESSIONS which Ned and Paula Bradley so graciously offered last fall.

There is hardly a cozier, more educational, and at the same time more delicious afternoon imaginable. The 27 people who attended thoroughly enjoyed it, and felt that their ten dollar, tax deductible, donation to the Historic Elsie Foundation was well spent.

The success of these CROISSANT BAKING SESSIONS was entirely due to the generous gift of time, thought, hospitality and all ingredients by both Ned and Paula Bradley.



In the fall of 1982 the Foundation continued its program of upgrading the Village Hall by having the front of the building cleaned and painted. There was also some patch painting on the sides of the Hall.



HEF is most appreciative of the generous donation of \$150.00 by Union Electric Company of Alton for the purpose of helping us purchase window shades for the Village Hall.

The twelve windows in the Hall are very large, making the shades a very costly project. However, window shades will enable the Hall to be used during daylight hours for slide programs and other illustrated talks.

They will also cut the summer heat helping to make the Hall cooler from June to September.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS:

Mr. and Mrs. Philip Bohms	Metairie, La.
Mr. and Mrs. Edward Bradley	Elsah, Il.
Mr. and Mrs. Harold Bunting	Kirkwood, Mo.
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hosmer	Elsah, Il.
Mr. and Mrs. Alred Mack	Elsah, Il.
Miss Nancy McDow	Elsah, Il.
Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Stone	Perrysburg, Oh.
Mr. and Mrs. Maitland Timmermiere	Alton, Il.
Mr. Carl Yeake	Laguna Beach, Ca.

THE GREAT RIVER

BY

FREDERICK OAKES
SYLVESTER

Y the red man's grave and the
ancient trail,
By cabin and camp I glide.
Dark pines o'er which the eagles
sail
Stand guardians at my side.

In a cradle of gentle hills I wake;
I nurse and sleep on the breast of a lake—
And when my first full leap I take,
I tremble in my pride.

By the fields of wheat and the fields of corn,
By forest and isles I flow.
Now shadowed by dusk, now mirror of morn,
Far down to the sea I go.
I join the mirth of a thousand rills
That laugh in the meadows and dance on the
hills,

My song the path of the springtime thrills
And the tide of the pathless snow.

By the great gray cliffs and the prairies wide,
By valley and farm I speed.
Fair Heaven I clasp, a willing bride,
To my ocean home to lead;
Her garments of gold and azure light
I fashion anew in our onward flight,
I double the jewels she wears at night,
Her every mood I heed.

By the fiery kilns and the noisy marts,
By city and town I race,
The smiles and tears of a million hearts
Are mirrored in my face;
The kiss and the curse, the sob and the song,
The cry of the weak and the shout of the
strong—

I gather them all as I hurry along,
And scatter them all apace.

By the deep bayou and the broad lagoon,
By the ranch and the range I roll;
The silver sheen of the southern moon
I offer the sea as toll.
I throw the delta gateways wide
In my rush to the deep, and, side by side
And hand in hand with the welcoming tide
I reach my journey's goal.

The drawing on the cover of this newsletter depicts the large brick building which used to sit right at the entrance to Elsay. Originally built by Brock and Onetto about 1858, it was sold to the Odd Fellows in 1871 who rented it to a variety of users. This sketch shows the original double chimneys (which were removed in 1886). From 1886 to 1890, a one-story wooden rail-road trestle ran between this building and Cosmos Keller's hotel (now Riverview House). The two men on the right are working where now stands a public telephone booth. The man on the left would today be standing in the middle of the entry road to the Great River Road. The perspective in this sketch does not show that the building was almost twice as long as it was wide.

